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## Easy to Play but Hard to Master: Featherbowling and Rust Belt Renaissance

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On Detroit's east side, in an area that has seen its fair share of rough times and rough characters, sits a corner bar that houses the only featherbowling lane in the United States. Housing the only of anything would seem like the ultimate asset but much like the city it occupies, The Cadieux Café specializes in survival.

Belgian immigrants opened the Cadieux Café in the early 1900s in the middle of a neighborhood that was soaked with people of the same European decent. What began as a general store, turned speakeasy during the prohibition, although blind pig is the more likely characterization. If the distinction between the two is lost on you, as it was on me, a speakeasy was an establishment that offered food and entertainment in addition to illegal drink. Speakeasies were establishments where men tended to wear a coat and tie and women some sort of evening dress. Speakeasies were *classy*. A blind pig, on the other hand, tended to be a bit more direct in its commercial purpose. Often described as lowbrow, the operator of such an establishment would charge customers to see an attraction (such as an animal) and then serve a "complimentary" alcoholic beverage, thus circumventing prohibition laws and ultimately giving patrons all the entertainment they were looking for – a nice buzz. Although the research unearthed regarding the early days of the Cadieux Café is ambiguous, if the current day aesthetic is any indicator the blind pig creation story seems more likely than the speakeasy.

Regardless of its start, the bar was born into legitimacy with the passing of the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment in 1933 and with that newfound status came Belgian mussels (mussels of the mollusk variety, not human brawn) and featherbowling. Featherbowling is a game that claims Flemish decent and can be described as a cross between American bowling and Italian bocce ball. Competition takes place in a convex dirt lane that measures 72 feet in length and 9 feet in width. There is a pigeon feather (tradition dictates this is the only feather that will do) dug into the dirt that stands erect at the end of each lane. Players roll balls down the lane with the intent of landing their ball closest to the feather. While the objective may seem straightforward and simple enough, it is anything but. A convex lane made of dirt, carved by human hand and shovel, means imperfection; it means unpredictable bumps and dips that can send a perfectly thrown ball off its intended course. The balls themselves also add to the precarity. Made up of seven layers of laminated maple, these balls are really spheres that have been flattened on two sides reminiscent of a wheel of cheese. They are 5 inches wide, weigh 5 1/3 pounds, and have a diameter of 7.8 inches making for a perfect combination of uncertainty and wobble. The sport, setting aside players' intent or intensity, was designed to be social. Typically featherbowling is played with three players to a team, each of the two teams has three attempts to land closest to the feather, accruing a point for each round. First team to 10 takes the prize.

The Cadieux Café turned hands many times from 1933 until 1962 but always remained at the heart, and increasingly the backbone, of the Belgian neighborhood it occupied. When Robert Devos and his Belgian-born wife Yvonne purchased the bar it 1962, Detroit was on the precipice of major economic and cultural upheaval which

manifested in the form of race riots and persistent economic decline beginning in 1967. By the time Robert died in the 1970s, ironically of a lung condition called Pigeon Breeder's disease, the troubles of the city had taken their toll on the café's neighborhood. Many Belgians had moved to the suburbs and beyond but Ron Devos, Robert's son, was committed to the Cadieux Café and continuing the legacy that was entrusted in him with his father's passing. Today, while the neighborhood is a bit rough, it is surviving. The Cadieux Café, the mussel dinners, and especially the featherbowling are doing more than that.

If you enter the arena of featherbowling with the intent of recreation, which many Detroiters do - beer in one hand and ball in the other, your café owned featherbowling balls will likely show the battle scars of the many bowlers who have rolled them before you. The sport attracts all walks of life, families, hipsters, old timers looking to pass a Sunday afternoon, and tourists. Yes, Detroit has tourists. The city is experiencing a bit of a renaissance and featherbowling at the Cadieux Café tops many of the 'must see/must do' lists that make their way through the World Wide Web to the screen of a well-researched visitor. If you do not fall into this demographic and are part of one of the bar's twice weekly league nights, your balls are sanded smooth as a baby's bottom and lovingly waxed to an impressive shine. This physical difference reflects not only a fastidious nature of the ball roller but a commitment to the game - a way of life - that has likely not been considered by the recreational player. Hinting at the ethos of the sport, Michael John, Secretary of the Cadieux Café Featherbowling Club commented in a 2015 ESPN Magazine article, "It is an odd little sport. Easy to play but hard to master."

For the recreational player, there are mussels to eat, beers to consume, and finally balls to throw down a dirt lane. It is all good fun. The game does not seem that complicated. For those who come out every Tuesday or Thursday evening to partake in league play, the stakes are much higher and the nuances of the game more pronounced. Leaguers forgo the team element of the game and play one on one making for a high stakes duel that is played out, over a long season, under the pantheon of featherbowling Gods, literally. The portraits of every league champion dating back to the early 1970s hang on the upper register of a wall that runs parallel to the lanes. These Gods both loom and beckon. They remind the league player if he has enough reverence for the game and faith in himself, infamy is always within reach . . . but at the same time incredibly difficult to attain.

Ron Devos now co-owns the Cadieux Café with his cousin Paul Misuraca and both men have heard much about the origins of featherbowling over the years. What has been most perplexing, as time has passed and stories have accumulated, is that most of the authentically Belgian visitors who have visited the bar have never heard of featherbowling. Adding to the mystery, several Cadieux Café patrons have gone about their own quests, traveled to northern sections Belgium with the intent of finding featherbowling, and returned home empty handed. This fiction or cultural amnesia has left Ron and Paul wondering if they are the domestic custodians of some long lost, transatlantic sport that has been forgotten by even its own

countrymen, or the owners of an establishment that created a bar game slightly more advanced (*recreational player*), but certainly more nuanced (*league player!!*), than darts. What is certain is that Ron and Paul are the stewards of a bar and a game that has found purpose in the development of a quirky community, likely contributed to the survival of the café's surrounding neighborhood, and is doing its part in the Detroit Renaissance.

End Notes:

Koentges, Chris. "Believe in Featherbowling." *ESPN Magazine*, June 2015.